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Radical Buddhism, Then and Now: Prospects of a Paradox

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Recommended Citation

Shields, James. "Radical Buddhism, Then and Now: Prospects of a Paradox." *Silvia Iaponicarum Special Edition: Japan: Challenges in the 21st Century* (2012) : 15-34.

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SILVA IAPONICARUM 日林
FASC. XXIII/XXIV/XXV/XXVI
第二十三・二十四・二十五・二十六号
SPRING/SUMMER/AUTUMN/WINTER
春・夏・秋・冬
2010

SPECIAL EDITION
JAPAN: NEW
CHALLENGES
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Posnaniae, Cracoviae, Varsoviae, Kuki MMX

***Silva Iaponicarum* 日林**
Kwartalnik japonistyczny / Quarterly on Japanology / 日本学季刊誌
ISSN 1734-4328

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Radical Buddhism, Then and Now: Prospects of a Paradox

For us, religion is life itself. Society is our concern. That is to say, society is what we are made of. Politics, economics, education, the military as well as the arts and so on, are all subsumed under religion. All aspects of social life must be subject to critique and reform in light of the spirit of the Buddha. Thus aspiring to change society, to know ourselves, to sincerely repent and to simultaneously repay with gratitude the grace [on] we have received – all these are part of the life of faith. At that level, there is no difference between the movement to better society conducted in faith and the same call to action from those believers in historical materialism, whether socialist or communist. (Seno'o 1975: 253)

Radical Buddhism?

Over the past century, every so often, Buddhist activists in Asia and the West have attempted to draw a bridge across the seemingly vast gap between Buddhism and radical politics, based on the provocative premise that Buddhism can add to radical political *praxis* and vice versa. While such attempts at Buddhist progressive politics have usually been under-theorized, we can also trace a series of references to the supposed accommodation between Karl Marx and the Buddha in the work of at least two prominent Western thinkers: Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004).

In *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), Lévi-Strauss argues that both Buddhism and Marxism aim for “liberation,” and as a result, have no obvious conflict. Far from being a teaching of resignation, he insists: “This great religion of not-knowingness... bears witness, rather, to our natural gifts, raising us to the point at which we discover truth in the guise of the mutual

exclusiveness of being and knowing. And, by a further audacity, it has achieved something that, elsewhere, only Marxism has brought off: it has reconciled the problem of metaphysics with the problem of human behaviour.” Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss sees within Buddhism a potential “missing link” in the chain between the quest for individual contentment and the drive for social justice. This resides in the fact that Buddhist liberation is a dialectical process that sublates and thus contains and “validates” its many stages – stages that incorporate an ethic of compassion and altruism. Summing this up, he concludes: “Between Marxist criticism which sets Man free from his first chains, and Buddhist criticism, which completes that liberation, there is neither opposition nor contradiction. Marxism and Buddhism are doing the same thing, but at different levels” (Lévi-Strauss 1961: 395-396).

Though Lévi-Strauss’s remarks might be dismissed as offhand comments within the swelling conclusion to a work that is famously anecdotal, they struck a chord with his student Jacques Derrida, who comments on them, in turn, in his own magnum opus, *Of Grammatology* (1967). For Derrida, Lévi-Strauss raises a salient issue that remains to be fully explored: whether Marxist criticism provides a sufficiently rounded analysis of human “suffering” and the path to “liberation,” and whether it may or must be supplemented by alternative forms of criticism – such as “for example, Buddhist criticism.” But, for Derrida, Lévi-Strauss undercuts any possibility of cross-fertilization by glossing over the differences and asserting the essential similarity of Buddhism and Marxism – something he is only able to do at the expense of history itself. In other words, Derrida’s concern is that the *only* point at which both Marxism and Buddhism can come together is a point of common weakness: *the lack of a deep sense of history or historical consciousness* (Derrida 1978: 120, 138).

In a recent work entitled *Ethical Marxism* (2008), Bill Martin takes up this exchange between Derrida and Lévi-Strauss, arguing with Derrida that despite Buddhism’s positive commitment to individual liberation, it “does not appear to have anything to say” about the problem of production, and about history as understood in the materialist sense. According to Martin:

“In Buddhism, history is primarily illusion and error, and though it could perhaps be considered the process by which one comes to enlightenment, as well, or at least the context, there is nothing in

Buddhism that allows us to focus on the particularities of history. We might even go so far as to say that, in Buddhism, it is history itself that is evil, and the point of enlightenment is to “rise above” this evil, to become “light” by throwing off the burden of historicity. Then one can see that this evil, like history, never really existed in the first place.” (Martin 2008: 35-36)

Without worrying for now about the adequacy of Martin’s picture of Buddhism, both he and Derrida hit upon a theme that is often perceived, with some justification, as a weakness of a religious tradition that claims to promote *liberation from suffering* – a liberation that, at least in East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, is believed to transcend the personal or individual. A brief glance at Asian history reveals that, when it comes to socio-political matters, the vast majority of Buddhist individuals and institutions have opted to support the powers that be and the status quo, even when this has entailed supporting a system of suffering for the majority of ordinary people.¹

On one level, this is not surprising, and may be at least partly attributed to the innate conservatism of religious institutions. And yet, it does raise important questions about the meaning of social liberation and structural suffering in Buddhist traditions, questions which have been addressed by only a select few figures in the history of modern Buddhism. In short, why has the promise of Lévi-Strauss not been fulfilled? I would like to explore this question today by looking in some detail at the life and work of Seno’o Girō (1889-1961), founder of the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism (Shinkō Bukkyō Seinen Dōmei), an early experiment in radical Buddhism from 1930s Japan, in order to draw some lessons about radical Buddhism as a possibility and reflect on its prospects in 21st-century Japan and elsewhere.

¹ Nowhere in East Asia has Buddhist support for the state been more evident than in Japan, a nation whose very political structure evolved in concert with institutional Buddhism. While it is true that relations between state and *sangha* in Japan were occasionally fractious, this is due less to Buddhist support of the common people against the state than to the fact that Buddhist institutions were so powerful as to actually challenge the secular leadership itself for supremacy!

Buddhist Socialism in Japan

The notion of “Buddhist socialism” in Japan actually predates the League, having been suggested by various scholars and Buddhist figures during the Meiji period.² As early as 1882, the founder of the Eastern Socialist Party (Tōyō Shakaitō) Tarui Tōkichi (1850-1922) wrote that the “children of the Buddha” had a special mandate to look upon the people with compassion. At about the same, Katayama Sen (1859-1933) began promoting a “spiritual socialism” founded on both Christian and Buddhist ideals. While the early Shōwa scholar Tanaka Sōgorō (1894-1961) viewed socialism as a mixture of Confucianism, Buddhism and western ideas, others felt that the Mahāyāna insistence on compassion was enough to render the Buddhist traditions of East Asia socialist in nature.

Though most of the so-called New Buddhists of the early twentieth century were resistant to socialism, a few, such as Mōri Shian, were sympathetic to the Commoner’s Society (Heiminsha), founded in 1903. The final years of the Meiji period saw a turn towards Buddhist socialism in the writings of Shin priest Takagi Kenmyō (1864-1914) – for whom socialism was “much more deeply related to religion than to politics” (Takagi 2002: 55) – and, most dramatically, in the famous case of Uchiyama Gudō (1874-1911), the Sōtō Zen priest who protested against rural poverty as “unjust and anti-Buddhist,” and, as a result, was arrested and executed on trumped up charges of plotting to assassinate the Emperor in what is known as the High Treason Incident (*taigyaku jiken*) (Victoria 2003: 204-207; Victoria 1997: 66-73; Ishikawa 1998; Davis 1992: 169-170). Even the writings of the Shin sect reformer Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903) – whose “spiritualism” (*seishinshugi*) comes under criticism from progres-

² As Large rightly notes, though much has been written on the connections between Christianity and socialism in modern Japan, very little attention has been paid to the Buddhist equivalent, despite the fact that “a modern Japanese Buddhist tradition of protest comparable in kind if not in scale to that found in Japanese Christianity” (Large 1987: 153). In fact, surprisingly little scholarly attention has been given to the topic of Buddhist socialism on a broader scale—and what does exist tends to focus on economics more than politics (e.g., E.F. Schumacher’s chapter on “Buddhist economics” in Schumacher 1973 and Payutto 1992 essay of the same name). The best brief analysis of Buddhist socialism can be found in Harvey (2000).

sive Buddhists – contain hints of utopian socialism, e.g., his references to a “Buddhist country” (*nyorai no kokka*) that might one day replace the present capitalistic and materialistic one (Najita 1980: 122).³

These experiments in progressive and radical Buddhism are particularly striking given the growing social conservatism from the late-Meiji period,⁴ as well as the general scepticism with which socialist movements have been viewed by Buddhists in Japan and elsewhere. Traditional Buddhist teachings of *karma* have long been used to both explain and inevitably justify social inequalities, and Japan is no exception to this rule. Buddhist Enlightenment figure Shimaji Mokurai was neither the first or last to blame poverty on the laziness and general moral laxity of the poor (Davis 1992: 177, n. 53). Moreover, for all its emphasis on compassion, East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism has a particularly quietistic side, due in part to the assimilation of Confucian political ideals (including harmony and hierarchy) as well as interpretations of more arcane philosophical teachings such no-self and emptiness. Despite the emphasis on interdependence and mutual interpenetration that one finds in East Asian Mahāyāna thought – especially the influential Kegon, Tendai and Zen schools – East Asian Buddhists have rarely used these concepts to support a critique of structural inequalities and systems of oppression, focusing instead on “private” acts of sin and vice.

With its relative openness, the Taishō period (1912-1925) saw a blossoming of Marxism in Japan – in philosophical, political, and literary forms. Within this broader wave, the movement most closely connected to Buddhism was the Muga-ai or Selfless Love society, founded by former Shin priest Itō Shōshin (1876-1963), whose mission was to promote and engage in compassionate action towards the poor and oppressed. Another figure in this movement was economist and writer Kawakami Hajime (1879-1946), author of the socialist classic *Bimbō monogatari* (tales of poverty, published as a serial in the *Osaka Asahi* newspaper, 1916). De-

³ Though Seno’o would later criticize Kiyozawa’s “spiritualism” for not paying enough attention to material needs, he generally agreed with the Shin sect reformer’s conviction that materialism by itself was insufficient for true social change (see Seno’o 1975: 386). In this way, as Lai (1984: 40) notes, his vision was similar to Tolstoy’s Christian socialism.

⁴ Seno’o was inspired by Kawakami’s writings, and particularly pleased to discover that they shared a love for the Mahāyāna Sutra of Infinite Meaning (Jp. *Muryōgikyō* 無量義經) (Large 1987: 160), a sutra is frequently regarded as a “prologue” to the *Lotus Sutra*.

spite these Taishō developments, by the early Shōwa period (1926-1989) tides had begun to turn against progressive politics, religious or otherwise. By the late 1920s, Buddhist institutions in Japan were claiming neutrality in growing struggles between labor and management, yet Buddhist leaders knew on which side their bread was buttered – or perhaps, who was supplying the soy sauce. So-called factory evangelists would parrot the government mottos about strength, harmony and unity, while denouncing “socialist agitators” (Davis 1999: 177).

The Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism

It was in this context that Seno’o Girō established the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, based on the notion that “the capitalist system generates suffering and, thus, violates the spirit of Buddhism.” The group’s initial mouthpiece was a journal called “Under the Banner of Revitalized Buddhism” (*Shinkō bukkyō no hata no moto ni*) though this title was soon shortened to simply “Revitalized Buddhism.” In addition to the regular publication of its journal, the League held a yearly national conference called “Revitalized Buddhist Youth” (*Shinkō bussei*). Here various positions were proclaimed and debated. For example, the third conference held in January, 1933 asserted the League’s opposition to nationalism, militarism, warfare, and the annexation of Manchuria (Jp. *Manshūkoku*), while the fourth conference held in January, 1934 stated their commitment to building a “cooperative society,” promoting internationalism, and bringing about a mutually productive unification of all Buddhist sects, and the fifth conference, held in January, 1935, made explicit the League’s intent to restructure the capitalist system, vigorously challenge “reactionary religious sects,” and allow each person to reach a state of perfection through inner purification (Kashiwahara 1990: 215). Needless to say, most if not all of these positions were in conflict with the trends of the times, towards growing nationalism, militarism and imperialism. In fact, they would seem to be framed in such a way as to draw attention to the movement.

As with the New Buddhists of the late Meiji period, Seno’o and the Youth League were fighting a war on (at least) two fronts: against conservative Buddhist institutions and so-called Imperial Way Buddhism (*kōdō bukkyō*) on one hand and against anti-Buddhist and anti-religious forces

on the other.⁵ This would require a delicate balance of apologetics and criticism. The League's Manifesto presents the following three foundational principles:

- “1) We resolve to realize the implementation of a Buddha Land in this world, based on the highest character of humanity as revealed in the teachings of Śākyamuni Buddha and in accordance with the principle of brotherly love.
- 2) We accept that all existing sects, having profaned the Buddhist spirit, exist as mere corpses. We reject these forms, and pledge to enhance Buddhism in the spirit of the new age.
- 3) We recognize that the present capitalist economic system is in contradiction with the spirit of Buddhism and inhibits the social welfare of the general public. We resolve to reform this system in order to implement a more natural society.” (Kashiwahara 1990: 214)

In general, the Youth League interpreted Buddhism as an atheistic, humanistic and ethical religion. In this they followed a number of their Buddhist Enlightenment and New Buddhist forebears. Yet while the rejection of preceding and existent forms of Buddhism is also reminiscent of these earlier movements, the language regarding the problems of the capitalist system – and the more explicit emphasis on material well-being – is new.

According to Seno'o, the League was established for three principle reasons, which are reflected in the three governing principles mentioned above: a) to overhaul or replace the decadent Buddhist institutions of the day with a form of Buddhism more suited to the modern age; b) to put an end to the ugly conflict between Buddhist sects; and c) to engage in a reconstruction of the capitalist economic system – which is in contradiction to the Buddhist spirit. Here is how Seno'o frames the economic issue in terms both pragmatic and Buddhist:

⁵ Leaving aside the residual anti-Buddhist rhetoric emerging from proponents of State Shinto, the two most significant *hanshūkyō* movements of this period were the Nihon Hanshūkyō Dōmei (Japan Anti-Religion Alliance), led by Sakai Toshihiko (1871-1933) and Takatsu Seidō (1893-1974), and the Nihon Sentoteki Mushinronsha Dōmei (Japan Militant Atheists' Alliance), established by Akita Ujaku (1883-1962). See Honma (1971).

“Praying to Śākyamuni Buddha will not make your rice bins overflow with rice. When you are poor, the Buddha taught that you should work diligently to earn money. However, in times like ours, when a fractured economic system makes it such that work brings no reward, we are taught that we must begin by remodeling that broken economic system in order to ensure the social welfare of the general public. We cannot expect to rely on commonplace slogans like “no poverty can catch up with industry.” According to the words of our Buddha, when you are sick, you should search for an appropriate cure and reflect on the cause of the illness. If you wish to preserve your health, no amount of prayer or devotion can match this.” (Seno’o 1975: 274)

In his work, Seno’o insists on a proper understanding of the causes and conditions of poverty. Since these causes and condition are both material *and* spiritual, then naturally the solution to poverty must also, against the secular Marxists, include aspects of the spiritual and material (Seno’o 1975: 312-13, 386). Further, Seno’o strongly denounces the Buddhist establishment for utilizing Buddhist doctrines such as *karma* and the wheel of rebirth as explanations – and *ex post facto* justifications – for social inequalities (Seno’o 1975: 275).⁶ Along similar lines, he criticizes the oft-employed Buddhist expression of “differentiation is equality” (*sabetsu soku byōdō*) as being an abstract concept that cannot and should not be applied to the social realm (Inagaki 1974: 16).⁷ More generally, Seno’o rejected the metaphysics of harmony – what Critical Buddhists like Hakamaya Noriaki and Matsumoto Shirō would later call “topicalism” – found within much of the Mahāyāna philosophical tradition, and

⁶ Criticism of the socio-political effects of *karma* in Buddhism can be seen in a number of contemporary works by scholars of Buddhist ethics, but also finds remarkable resonance in an essay by Polish thinker Leszek Kolakowski entitled “The Priest and the Jester,” in which this “Marxist humanist” criticizes the similar legacy of theodicy in Western thought—including within Marxism itself; see Kolakowski (1968: 13).

⁷ On both of these points, Seno’o may have been thinking of and no doubt regretting some of his own words as a proponent of Nichirenism. In various pieces in the journal *Wakōdo*, he had argued for precisely such positions (e.g., Seno’o 1975: 13, 48) – positions which, as Lai (1984: 17) notes, are doctrinally sound according to the metaphysical idealism inherent in mainstream Tendai-Nichiren thought.

reaching a peak within the Tendai synthesis, and *hongaku* thought more generally.⁸

It is perhaps more accurate to say that – in developing his earlier Nichirenism – Seno’o came to see harmony and the overarching vision of totality presented in Mahāyāna/Tendai thought and the *Lotus Sutra* as a goal to be reached through historical (including economic and political) transformation, rather than an *a priori* ontological ground that must simply be recognized (Lai 1984: 22). In similar fashion, suffering was an existential condition to be analyzed and eliminated, rather than – as some within the Tendai and associated traditions would have it – an illusory concept to be transcended via a dialectics of emptiness or a deeper realization of Buddha-nature.

A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution

Among all of Seno’o’s writings, the document that stands out as the most succinct expression of the theoretical and practical aims of the Youth League is one he published in January 1932, entitled *Shakai henkaku tojō no shinkō bukkyō* (Revitalized Buddhism on the Road to Social Reform). This essay is prefaced with a statement by the Youth League indicting the present capitalist system as the principle cause of economic and political insecurity for the general public – both farmers and urbanites. This is followed by reaffirmation of the League’s conviction that Buddhism – *if understood, reorganized, and practiced on the basis of modern ideas* – can be a solution to the problems unleashed by capitalism, and thus a foundation for the salvation of humankind (Seno’o 1975: 325). Seno’s piece begins with a critique of the notion that history is “progress,” using Marx’s argument against the conservative political implications of the Hegelian thesis that “all that is rational is real; and all that is real, rational” (Seno’o 1975: 328).

Seno’o goes on to affirm of the revolutionary character of Japanese history, citing the Taika Reforms of 645 CE, the medieval shift from imperial rule to rule by the samurai class, the rise to power of the bourgeoisie

⁸ Zhiyi (538-597), the third patriarch and principal systemizer of Chinese Tiantai, developed the notion that the Three Marks of Existence (Skt. *trilakṣaṇa*; Ch. *sānxiàng* 三相) found in traditional (“Hīnayāna”) Buddhism had been superseded by the Mahāyāna One Real Mark (Skt. *ekalakṣaṇa*; Ch. *yīxiàng* 一相).

under the Meiji Restoration of 1868, and finally the emerging movements dedicated to bringing about a “revitalized society” (*shinkō shakai*) as examples of dramatic, if not revolutionary, political upheavals in Japanese history. Further, Seno’o argues, the history of Buddhism is similarly marked with a revolutionary spirit, in theory if not always in practice. In fact, Buddhism is “nothing other than the truth of development and change (*hatten henka no dōri igai no mono de wa nai*).” Throughout the twenty-five centuries of Buddhist history, alterations to doctrine and practice made by sect founders have largely suited the objective reality of changing social conditions – and are thus not simply the product of their own subjective beliefs. Further, no matter how much development and change occurs, Buddhism will always maintain its social value (Seno’o 1975: 329).

In the following section, Seno’o makes a link between the Youth League’s quest for a “revitalized” (*shinkō*) Buddhism, a new society, and contemporaneous movements towards revitalization in science, art and education. Just as they have “liquidated” the previous outdated forms from earlier times, so too must Buddhism effect the same sort of liquidation or deconstruction. And yet, institutional Buddhism is clearly unwilling to make this move, due to its apathy towards the concerns of the general public and its preference to appease the powers that be (Seno’o 1975: 329). If Buddhism is to become once again “Buddhism for society” (as opposed to “society for Buddhism”), then modern Buddhists must recapture the spirit of their Kamakura era forbears and respond to the changing times. But what, exactly, are the demands of the times to which a modern Buddhism must adjust? Seno’o duly provides the reader with the following list:

- 1) modern science is atheist, and denies the existence of superhuman deities;
- 2) modern science is anti-spiritualist, and does not recognize an afterlife;
- 3) modern people are not satisfied with fairy-tale like forms of happiness, but rather wish to enjoy a complete happiness in their workaday lives;
- 4) the modern public longs for economic stability, and thus demands reform to the capitalistic system;

- 5) enlightened people call for an end to nationalism and the birth of internationalism;
- 6) progressive Buddhists (*shinpoteki bukkyō shinja*) long for an end to sectarian division and the emergence of Buddhist unity. (Seno'o 1975: 330-31)

These, in short, are the needs of the age to which a revitalized Buddhism must respond. The first three points, along with number six, also happen to align well with modernist interpretations of Buddhism that had been promoted since the 1880s. It is also of note that, with the exception of number six, there is nothing in this list that distinguishes Seno'o and the Youth League from the anti-religious vision of most mainstream socialists. And yet, this was sticking point for Seno'o; he remained deeply committed to promoting a vision for a new society based firmly in Buddhist principles, as he and his followers understood them.

For Seno'o and the Youth League, just as socialism can wake Buddhists up from their dogmatic slumbers, Buddhism serves to "soften" the harder edges of mainstream socialist atheism and materialism – in short, Buddhism gives a humanist element that socialism sometimes, perhaps inevitably, seems to lack. At some points in his work, Seno'o seems to suggest that socialism, as it has been practiced both within and outside of Japan, falls prey to the same or similar tendencies as mainstream religions, including historical and institutional Buddhism: tendencies summed up by terms like "idealism" (*seishinshugi*) "abstract" (*chūshōteki*) and "reverence" (*sūkei*). In an explicit critique of the increasingly vocal *hanshūkyō* movements of the early 1930s, Seno'o asserts the value of Buddhist teachings such as no-self to (ironically) promote individual perfection as well as social liberation (Seno'o 1975: 378).

The following sections of *Shakai henkaku tojō no shinkō bukkyō* examine these six points in more detail. On the question of atheism, Seno'o cites both Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) and Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) with regard to the problems inherent in belief in an absolute, transcendent deity. While this obviously pertains primarily to the Abrahamic God, it also applies to various forms of Buddhist practice, including Shin worship of Amida, Nichiren praise to the eternal Buddha, and Shingon rituals performed to Dainichi and so forth. Even Zen Buddhists, who, Seno'o notes, are in theory less imbricated in the worship of superhuman

forces, put their palms together to pay worship to Yakushi Nyorai and Kannon Bosatsu. Must we, then, accepted the belief in superhuman forces as an essential character of Buddhism? Seno'o's answer is a firm "no" (Seno'o 1975: 331). The proceeding argument is simple: belief in "God/gods" was born out of human ignorance (*muchi ga kami o umu*), and since Buddhism is relentlessly opposed to ignorance, this belief must be liquidated.

Seno'o's brief overview of the origins of religious belief borrows much from Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and James G. Frazer (1854-1941), but leans heavily on Marx and Engels when it comes to the discussion of the economic and socio-political implications of religious belief. Biblical lines such as "man does not live by bread alone" are, to Seno'o as to his Marxist forebears, dead giveaways; i.e., little more than cynical catch-phrases to keep ordinary people in a state of subservience through the invocation of otherworldly forms of happiness (Seno'o 1975: 333-34). In other words, religion – *at least religion that seeks solace in superhuman figures and an afterlife* – functions as an "opiate" (*ahen*) for the people (Seno'o 1975: 334). He also employs the by-now standard argument against an omnipotent, good deity based on the longstanding theological conundrum of theodicy: if god (or Amida, or Dainichi, or Kannon) is both supremely powerful and good, then why does suffering continue to occur – to both religious people and atheists alike?

Without wading into the deep waters of this debate, Seno'o might be accused of sleight-of-hand on this point, since he is willfully collapsing any and all distinctions between worship of the Christian God and paying reverence to Buddhist figures – who are neither creators of the universe, nor, with the possible exception of Amida, generally thought to have complete salvific power. At any rate, Seno'o does not spare non-institutional religious practices such as geomancy and fortune-telling, which similarly advocate reliance on superhuman power of some form. No matter how deeply they may have penetrated the cultural or rural people, these "evil heresies" (*inshi jakyō*) must also be countermanded by a revitalized Buddhism, which has no choice but to promote "atheism" (*mushinron*) (Seno'o 1975: 334). Again, the point for Seno'o is that these practices act as "opiates" by taking away from an individual's power to effect their own destiny. The problem is not, as it was for many of the earlier generation of "new Buddhists," simply or mainly a matter of priestly corruption or insti-

tutional generation – the problem goes to very heart of the way Buddhism is practiced as a “religion.” Thus, to establish – or re-establish – an atheistic and materialistic (*yuibutsronteki*) form of Buddhism is, for Seno’o, to re-establish Buddhism as a form of humanism, based on the well-known humanist dictum (repeated by Marx): “the supreme reality for human beings is human being” (*ningen ni tai suru saikō no jitsuzai wa ningen de aru*). This also means returning to the basic Buddhist teachings of the Four Noble Truths (*shitai*) and twelve-link chain of dependent arising (*jūni innen*), which, in Seno’s admittedly abbreviated interpretation, amount to a teaching of human emancipation (*jinrui kaihō*) based on the practice of “selflessness” (*mugaizumu*), which is itself a necessary conclusion of the more fundamental law of cause and effect (*enga no rihō*) (Seno’o 1975: 335). All this is fairly standard Buddhism, except for Seno’s coinage of the term *mugaizumu* (lit., “no-self”-ism) to imply a more altruistic or other-directed form of the traditional doctrine of no-self (*muga*).

Also of note is Seno’o’s emphasis on awakening as “human liberation” – which also adds a communal element lacking in most traditional renderings of the experience of *nirvana* or *satori*. The term *kaihō* is in fact best translated as liberation or emancipation, and is generally used to apply to social or political freedom as understood in the Western liberal tradition (e.g., women’s liberation movement: *jōsei kaihō undō*; emancipation of serfs: *nōdo kaihō*; liberation theology: *kaihō shingaku*). In Seno’o’s reading of early Buddhism – or at least the fundamental teachings of Śākyamuni – there is a decisive rejection of the existence of superhuman forces of any sort and a focus on contingency and the practice of selfless compassion for others. It is this unrelenting commitment to humanism that forms the bridge between Buddha and Marx, and forms a tool of critical resistance to the “nonsense” forms of Buddhism that practice reverence to superhuman buddhas and bodhisattvas, as well as to forms of Indian and Abrahamic theism. Finally – in a display of intellectual integrity – Seno’o criticizes non-theistic traditions that pay excessive reverence to founding fathers. This includes not only Confucians who revere Confucius but also communists who line up to pay respect to the deceased but embalmed Lenin (Seno’o 1975: 336). “Original Buddhism was not an opiate. In the end, Buddhism is atheistic. To begin with, a ‘revitalized Buddhism’ must assume this exalted position in order to liquidate the delusions of existing forms of Buddhism and completely destroy the opiate-like role played by existing Buddhism.” (Seno’o 1975: 337)

In addition to being atheistic, Seno'o goes on to argue, Buddhism is "materialistic," at least in the sense of being concerned with the various forms of material suffering that occur in the world. Though it would be a mistake to take materialism to an extreme, Seno'o cites various teachings to show that the Buddha was clearly not antagonistic to a materialist perspective, and was, if anything, more resistant to the sort of world-denying idealism that one finds within brahmanistic asceticism (Seno'o 1975: 350). Without a grounding in the material world, the Dharma would become a means of escape from existence, and thus an "opiate" like and any other religion. Moreover, the founders of the various Japanese sects were committed to reinscribing the original Buddhist concern for worldly suffering. Hōnen and Shinran are lauded for their commitment to fomenting "religious revolution focused on actual life" (*genjitsu seikatsu o shitei shita shukyo kakumei*).

Though a believer in the next world, Nichiren was equally committed to improving life in this one. Seno'o argues that a central intention of the master's *Rissho ankoku ron* is the promise of relief for the poverty-stricken of his day (Seno'o 1975: 351). Looking back at the ups and downs of two and a half millenia of Buddhist history, what do we learn? Is it possible to achieve a victory over materialism by promoting idealism (*busshitsushugi no kokufuku wa seishinshugi no kōchō ni yotte*)? No, Seno'o answers, Buddhist history reveals the opposite: i.e., the victory over idealism must come by way of advocacy of materialism.

"For human beings, born from nature, nature must be our top priority. If concepts and matters of the spirit transcend ordinary existence, it is only natural that a powerless idealism will ignore or despise economic matters rooted in daily life. It is not the case that "the real world is built on ideas." Rather, it is only from the total spectrum of our lives that concepts are born, and it is only through putting them into practice that development can occur. " (Seno'o 1975: 359)

In making his case for materialism against the pitfalls of abstract idealism, Seno'o is quick to note that the importance of "love" (*ai*), which, he argues, "is neither a concept nor an illusion (*tan naru kannen ya gensō de wa naku*), but rather a practice (*jissen*) – and one that, when properly ac-

accompanied by objective criticism (*kyakkanteki hihan*), allows us to recognize (the problems of) ordinary life.” (Seno’o 1975: 363) Here, again, Seno’s interpretation of Buddhist compassion is brought in to soften the otherwise hard-edged Marxist critique. Buddhist love – embodied in the way of the bodhisattva – provides the humanist foundation for social revolution.⁹

“The recognition and practice of collective society by way of social science and the path of Buddhism are not by any means identical. Here there is some room for critique of both extremes, i.e. collective forms of social organization and the capitalist ones. Therefore, Buddhists must take the initiative to advocate, practice and participate in social reconstruction, and through such participation aim for personal (as well as social) purification.” (Seno’o 1975: 367)

In further elaborating on what Buddhism can bring to socialist analysis, Seno’o notes that at the root of the Buddhist worldview is a fundamental conception of the interdependence of matter and mind, and of mind and form. Thus it would be a huge mistake to simply reduce problems of economic welfare and the need for social restructuring to material concerns. Rather, progressive Buddhists must demand a movement that allows for the development of social existence in its many facets. For Seno’o, this entails a recognition of the fuller implications of the social extension of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self – alternately rendered *mugaizumu*, *mugashugi*, or *muga-ai* (Seno’o 1975: 367). This term becomes, for Seno’o, the very embodiment of the Dharma, and must replace any and all attempts to find salvation by way of “idealistic abstractions” such as Pure Land’s Amida, Shingon’s Dainichi, and the Eternal Buddha of the *Lotus Sutra* (Seno’o 1975).¹⁰

⁹ See Seno’o (1975: 385), where Seno’o insists the Youth League is more than simply an economic movement (*tan naru keizai undō*), but rather one that promotes a “new idealism” (*shin risōshugi*) and a “new humanism” (*shin jindōshugi*) in order to construct a “pure buddha-land” (*jōbukkōdo*) in this world.

¹⁰ Here Seno’o cites supportive passages from late-Meiji and Taishō Buddhist scholars Takakusa Junjirō (1866-1945) and Shimaji Daitō (1875-1927).

Prospects of Radical Buddhism in Japan

By 1936, according to Japan's Ministry of Justice records, membership in the Youth League had reached 400 (with over 100 subscribers to the journal), with 22 branches established in 17 prefectures, making it an object of legitimate concern for the government.¹¹ Yet, as much if not more than this, it was Seno'o's active involvement with the broader left-wing popular front that would lead to his eventual arrest.¹² Under the auspices of the Public Order Preservation Act (*Chian iji hō*) of 1925, Seno'o was arrested on 7 December 1936 and charged with treason. In the spring of 1937, after five months of relentless interrogation, Seno'o would confess his crimes and pledge his loyalty to the emperor. Sentenced to five years in prison, he was released due to ill health in 1942. After the war, he resumed his work for peace and social justice, though in a more subdued vein.¹³

Many of the platforms of the Youth League were adopted by the Buddhist Socialist League (Bukkyō Shakaishugi Dōmei, 1946; later known as the Buddhist Social Alliance [Bukkyō Shakai Dōmei]), the National Alliance for Buddhist Reform (Zenkoku Bukkyō Kakushin Dōmei, 1949), and, following the 1962 Japanese Religionists Peace Conference, by the Religionists Peace Movement (Shūkyō-sha Heiwa Undō) (Ōtani 2008: 7). These movements, however, would have little impact on either

¹¹ These numbers vary widely depending on the source. The League itself claimed as many as 3000 "members" (the number reached by its predecessor, the Nichirenist Youth League, before its dissolution) while Ministry of the Interior records give much lower figures (524 subscribers and 146 members in 18 branches across 14 prefectures). See Ōtani (2008: 6, nn.17, 18).

¹² In addition to his association with the National Council of Trade Unions and Proletarian Party of Japan, Seno'o was involved with the following left-wing organizations: Han-Nachisu, Han-Fassho Funsai Dōmei (Anti-Nazi, Anti-fascist Demolition League, July 1933); Kyokutō Heiwa Tomo no Kai (Far East Friends of Peace Association, August 1933); Tōkyō Musan Dankai Kyōgikai (Tokyo Proletarian Convention, September 1933); Tohoku Kikin Kyūen Musan Dankai Kyōgikai (Northeast Famine Relief Convention, December 1933).

¹³ See McCormick (2002), Lai (1984). While Lai's study is significant for providing the first English analysis of Seno'o's thought, his article is riddled with psychologistic generalizations that limit its usefulness and date it as a piece of the early 1980s. The only other English-language study of Seno'o and the Youth League is that of Large, which, though solid, does not delve very deeply into the philosophy or ethics of Seno'o's Buddhist socialism.

Japanese politics or religion in the postwar period. This is due a number of factors, including the very different socio-political and economic landscape of the postwar years – first under the Occupation and later with the boom years of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw Japan emerge as a world economic power. Perhaps more significant, however, was the rise of the so-called New Religions, such as Soka Gakkai and Tenrikyō, which provided both a renewed source of spiritual solace and a promise of worldly happiness – a combination that traditional Japanese religions such as Buddhism and Shinto have had difficulty competing with.

These new religious movements, including more recent ones such as Kōfuku-no-kagaku and Aum Shinrikyō (now called Aleph), generally offer an eclectic mix of Buddhist, Shinto, Christian and theosophical or new age teachings. Far from being progressive, their politics range from moderately conservative to reactionary. In terms of more strictly Buddhist revival movements, the most influential has been the Agon-shū, which asserts – like the Youth League and the progressive New Buddhists of the early century – that they are retrieving the original Buddhism taught by Śākyamuni Buddha himself. And yet, while the Agon-shū is clearly committed to the promotion of peace in a general sense, it is not a movement that encourages political activism. In this sense, Agon-shū is closer to the New Buddhist movements of late Meiji than the radical Buddhists of early Shōwa.

A quarter century ago, in one of the first and only Western studies on Seno'o Girō and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism, Whalen Lai made the case that the vicissitudes of Seno'o's life effectively "recapitulated the whole dilemma of Japanese Buddhism since the Meiji Restoration... and highlights well the unresolved conflicts at the heart of modern liberal Buddhism." (Lai 1984: 7) This was echoed a few years later by Stephen Large, who remarked that "Seno'o Girō exemplified a tradition of protest within Japanese Buddhism which merits further examination in future research to provide a more balanced perspective on Buddhism as a political force in modern Japanese history." (Large 1987: 168) While I am certainly in favor of extending historical research on Buddhist forms of social protest and Buddhist radicalism, I would like to also ensure that the important theoretical work of Seno'o and like-minded progressive and radical Buddhists be subject to serious and sustained analysis, and not be dismissed as superficial or secondary to their social and political activities.

Finally, we must also be prepared to examine the work of progressive and radical Buddhists as a form of humanist critique of mainstream Marxist and socialist thought – an element that was fundamental to the writings and life work of Seno'o Girō. Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the so-called radical Buddhists of Japan is the fact that their work was, to a large extent, anti-ideological, in the sense that Buddhist and Marxist ideas were always tempered by a commitment to the pragmatic relief of material human suffering. It seems that we have not learned one of the principal lessons of the twentieth-century: the destructiveness of absolutist ideologies – whether religious or secular – on ordinary human beings. This is a lesson that Seno'o and the radical Buddhists took to heart. In this sense, Seno'o Girō would have no doubt approved of the following words of the great Polish thinker Leszek Kolakowski (1927-2009):

“We declare ourselves in favor of the jester's philosophy, and thus vigilant against any absolute; but not as a result of a confrontation of arguments, for in these matters important choices are value judgments. We declare ourselves in favor of the possibilities contained in the extraintellectual values inherent in this attitude, although we also know its dangers and absurdities. Thus we opt for a vision of the world that offers us the burden of reconciling in our social behavior those opposites that are the most difficult to combine: goodness without universal toleration, courage without fanaticism, intelligence without discouragement, and hope without blindness. All other fruits of philosophical thinking are unimportant.” (Kolakowski 1968: 36-37)

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